The jizz of doves in the Sahel, and how to remember their calls

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Une courte description est donnée des espèces de Colombidés habitant le Sahel, et notamment de leur apparence générale et leur aspect à l'envol. Une transcription aide-mémoire des vocalisations est présentée, en anglais et en français.

Confused by all those different turtle doves in the Sahel, and by their calls? I certainly was when I first went to live in Niamey, the capital of Niger. And this despite owning the relevant volume of *The Birds of Africa*[5], as well as various field guides. However, my flight identification skills were sharpened while driving 40 km of dirt road to work each day, with doves constantly flying up in front of the car. And after systematically checking each confusing cooing in the bush, I found that many species just call their own name, after a fashion, in English or Latin, and sometimes in French as well. Try the call descriptions below, summarised in Table 1, and see whether they work in your part of the Sahel. You can also compare them with the CDs of Chappuis[3], though I used his records[2]. Call syllables that are emphasised are presented in CAPITALS. Just as in Borrow & Demey[1], a hyphen '-' indicates a very short pause, a space a normal pause as in ordinary conversation, a comma a longer pause (about one second), and several dots '...' a pause of more than two seconds. Plumage and jizz descriptions are based on my own observations, with some help originally from Serle *et al*[4] and *The Birds of Africa*[5], and latterly from Borrow & Demey[1] and van Perlo[6]. General indications of distribution are from *The Birds of Africa*[5] and Borrow & Demey[1]. Suggestions for improvements are welcome, in particular for the French renditions of the calls.

Larger turtle doves

The **African Collared Dove** *Streptopelia roseogrisea* or **Tourterelle rieuse** is relatively large and solid as turtle doves in the Sahel go, and quite pale-coloured. As it flies off, its upperwing-coverts appear especially pale. It has white tail corners and a white underwing. It occurs in the arid Sahel, from Senegal and Mauritania to Eritrea and Somalia. In the southern part of its range, including around Niamey, it is much more frequent during the dry season than in the wet. Also known as Rose-grey Dove (as in its scientific name), it appears to call an emphatic 'ROSE, GRRRREY', repeated every 2–3 to five seconds, with a clear pause between calls. Or 'ROSE, GRRRRIS' in French, if you prefer.

The **African Mourning Dove** *Streptopelia decipiens* or **Tourterelle pleureuse** is also relatively large and heavily built, but as it flies away it presents a much darker grey impression than the African Collared Dove. It has a red eye-ring like the Red-eyed Dove *S. semitorquata*, though more conspicuous, and it is not as dark brown as the latter. It also has white corners to the tail. It occurs throughout the Sahel and Sudan zones, and discontinuously in drier parts of eastern and southern Africa to the Limpopo, seldom far from water. In the Niamey area it is present all year, especially in areas with a water supply, such as irrigated gardens or near the river. One call is a rapidly reverberating 'I mou-ou-ou-ourn', or in French 'JE pleu-eu-eu-eure', repeated every four seconds. It can also call 'MOUR ning-DOVE' every two seconds ('PLEU reu-SE'). And, when it alights, it gives a call described by others as 'an excited treble gargle'[5] or 'a resonant quavering gargle'[1]. I cannot improve on these descriptions and am sure you will easily recognise the call, once you know which species it comes from.

Further south, and also quite large, is the **Red-eyed Dove** *Streptopelia semitorquata* or **Tourterelle à collier.** It has a narrow red eye-ring, but unlike the previous species it is rather dark brownish grey on the back, including its shoulders. As it flies off you can also sometimes see the dark band close to the tip of the tail, which lacks white corners. It occurs in well-wooded areas throughout sub-Saharan Africa, including the Sudan and Guinea savanna zones of West Africa, but not in rain forest. Red-eyed Dove calls vary[2], and can be rendered as 'I AM a-red-eyed-dove', 'I-am-a-RED eyed-dove' or 'I'm-a-RED-eyed-dove', repeated every two seconds. The 'I-am' is sometimes omitted. In French this can be transcribed, with some imagination, as 'J'AI UN col-lier-er-er', 'J'ai-un-col-LIER-er-er' or 'un-col-LIER-er-er', with the 'J'ai-un' sometimes omitted.

Medium-sized turtle doves

The **European Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur* or **Tourterelle des bois**, is of medium size, quite elegant, and recognisable as it flies away by its rufous shoulders with dark centres to the feathers. It has a black-and-white streaked patch on the neck-side and clear white tail corners. It is exclusively a dry-season visitor throughout the Sahel and northern Sudan zones, though there are resident populations of the race *hoggara* in montane Niger and Chad. As its name indicates, it mainly migrates from

Europe to sub-Saharan Africa, with some individuals perhaps arriving from North Africa. It is generally recorded in small to very large flocks. Like the African Collared Dove, the European Turtle Dove, on its breeding grounds at least, calls its own scientific name, a soft and melodious, purring 'turrrr turr-turrrr', repeated every 2–3 seconds. There is some disagreement as to whether it calls at all while south of the Sahara[1,5], but I am pretty certain I have heard it there.

The similar but rather darker, larger, heavier and less gregarious **Adamawa Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia hypopyrrha* or **Tourterelle de l'Adamoua** is known from Nigeria, north Cameroon and south-west Chad, but not from Niger. It is, however, more widespread in West Africa than previously thought, with recent observations from Senegal and The Gambia, and also from Togo[1]. It has a grey, not white, tip to the tail and a solid dark, not striped, neck patch. It has a call similar to that of European Turtle Dove, but deeper, more grinding and less melodious.

Captions to plate on opposite page

Top row, left to right: Blue-spotted Wood Dove *Turtur afer*, Black-billed Wood Dove *T. abyssinicus* and Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis*.

Second row, left to right: Adamawa Turtle Dove *Streptopelia hypopyrrha*, Laughing Dove *S. senegalensis* and European Turtle Dove *S. turtur*.

Third row, left to right: African Collared Dove *S. roseogrisea* (above and below) and Vinaceous Dove *S. vinacea* (above and below).

Bottom row, left to right: African Mourning Dove *S. decipiens* and Red-eyed Dove *S. semitorquata*.

Table 1. Summary of jizz and call mnemonics of Sahelian doves

Species	Jizz as it flies from road and other characteristics	Call, English	Call, French
larger turtle doves			
African Collared Dove	Large and solid; pale, also its shoulders; white corners to tail	'ROSE, GRRRREY' every 2– 5 seconds	'ROSE, GRRRRIS'
African Mourning Dove	Large and solid; much darker grey; white corners to tail	'I mou-ou-ou-ourn' rapidly reverberating, every four seconds; 'MOUR ning-DOVE' every two seconds; a gargling call upon alighting	'JE pleu-eu-eu-eu-re' 'PLEU reu-SE'
Red-eyed Dove	Large and solid; rather dark brownish grey; dark band across tail, which has no white corners	'I AM a-red-eyed-dove', 'I-am-a-RED-eyed-dove' or 'I'm-a-RED-eyed-dove', repeated every two seconds (the 'I am' sometimes omitted)	J'AI UN col-lier-er-er', 'J'ai-un-col-LIER-er-er' or 'un-col-LIER-er-er' (the 'J'ai un' sometimes omitted)
medium-sized turtle doves			
European Turtle Dove	Medium size, quite elegant; rufous shoulders with dark centres to the feathers; clear white corners to tail	'TURRR turr-TURRR' soft, melodious, purring; every 2–3 seconds	'TURRR turr-TURRR'
Adamawa Turtle Dove	Larger, heavier and darker than European Turtle Dove; grey corners to tail	'TURRR turr-TURRR' deeper, more grinding and less melodious than European	'TURRR turr-TURRR'
small turtle doves			
Vinaceous Dove	Small; rather pale, fairly evenly grey-brown on back with dark flight feathers; large white corners to tail	'NACE-ous-dove', sometimes 'NACE-ous' every second or faster, seemingly for minutes on end	'VIN-eu-se', sometimes 'VIN-eu'
Laughing Dove	Small, somewhat longer tailed; quite brown on back and shoulders, with bluish-grey greater coverts and dark flight feathers; white corners to tail	'i-AM a-LAUGH-ing-dove' or 'i-AM a-LAU-augh-ing-dove'every three seconds or so	'je-SUIS maill-ÉE-ée-ée' or 'je-SUIS maill-ÉE-ée-ée-ée'
other small doves			
Namaqua Dove	Slight, slim and long-tailed; rufous primaries and underwings; male has a black face mask	'na MAAA qua' or 'na MAAA' soft (especially the first syllable), relaxed, every three seconds or so	'na MAAA qua' or 'na MAAA'
Black-billed Wood Dove	Very small; rufous flight feathers and short black tail; drier savanna; black bill	hesitantly starting and slowly accelerating series of calls, with diagnostic three-syllable 'BLACK-a-BILL...BLACK-a-BILL' in the middle	three-syllable 'AB-ys-SINE' in the middle of a slowly accelerating series of calls
Red-billed Wood Dove	Very small; rufous flight feathers and short black tail; moister woodland; red-and-yellow bill	hesitantly starting and slowly accelerating series of calls, without a three-syllable phrase in the middle	no three-syllable phrase in the middle

Small turtle doves

Of the small turtle doves, Vinaceous Dove *Streptopelia vinacea* or Tourterelle vineuse is rather pale and fairly evenly grey-brown on the back, with dark flight feathers and large white corners to the tail. It occurs throughout the northern tropics of Africa, between the Sahara and the rain forest, from the Atlantic to 40°E. Vinaceous Dove is present year-round in the Niamey area and calls a monotonous 'NACE-ous-dove NACE-ous-dove NACE-ous-dove', repeated every second or faster, seemingly for minutes on end. Sometimes it drops the dove and just calls 'NACE-ous', twice per second. In French it calls 'VIN-eu-se VIN-eu-se VIN-eu-se', and sometimes 'VIN-eu VIN-eu VIN-eu'. It is often audible on the soundtracks of television documentaries from the Sahel.

And finally there is the quite small, but somewhat longer tailed Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* or Tourterelle maillée. It is rather brown on the back and shoulders, with bluish-grey greater coverts and dark flight feathers, and white corners to the tail. It is the only species considered here that has a rufous necklace with black speckles. It occurs virtually throughout sub-Saharan Africa, except the very dry and the very wet regions, never very far from water and often near human settlements. Laughing Dove calls 'i-AM a-LAUGH-ing-dove' or 'i-AM a-LAU-augh-ing-dove' every three seconds or so. In French 'je-SUIS maill-ÉE-ée-ée' or 'je-SUIS maill-ÉE-ée-ée-ée'.

Other small doves

Several other small doves may also be found on Sahelian roads and in the Sahelian bush. The Namaqua (Long-tailed) Dove *Oena capensis* or Tourterelle à masque de fer, is instantly recognisable by its long tail and slight, slim build, as well as its rufous primaries and underwing. It is the only dove in the Sahel to exhibit clear sexual dimorphism: only males possess the beautiful black facial mask. It is common and widespread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, excluding rainforest areas. Namaqua Dove calls a soft (especially the first syllable) and relaxed 'na MAAA qua' or 'na MAAA' every three seconds or so.

The Black-billed Wood Dove *Turtur abyssinicus* or Tourtelette d'Abyssinie, is very small, and when flushed exhibits rufous flight feathers and a short tail that appears all black. In flight, when the different bill colour and wing-spot colour (dark blue rather than amethyst-blue) cannot be seen, it is virtually indistinguishable from Red-billed Wood Dove, though Black-billed is reportedly greyer and paler[1]. In addition, Black-billed Wood Dove occurs in drier Sahelian and Sudanian savannas, from Senegal to Eritrea, and south to the Gulf of Guinea in the Dahomey Gap. Red-billed Wood Dove is more a forest-zone bird, though there is overlap in their distributions. In Ethiopia and Uganda confusion with the Emerald-spotted Wood Dove or Tourtelette émeraudine *Turtur chalcospilos* is also possible[5]. Black-billed Wood Dove's call is a hesitantly starting 'BLACK... BILL...BLACK...BILL', gradually accelerating to 'BLACK BILL...BLACK BILL' and then a diagnostic three-syllable 'BLACK-a-BILL...BLACK-a-BILL', to finish with a fast 'BLACK-BLACK-BLACK', two or three syllables per second. In French 'AB...BYS...AB...BYS' then 'AB BYS...AB BYS' and 'AB-ys-SINE...AB-ys-SINE' and finally 'AB-AB-AB'.

One hundred kilometres south of Niamey, in the Sudanian zone, it is also possible to encounter Red-billed Wood Dove *Turtur afer* or Tourtelette améthystine. In flight, when its amethyst-blue wing-spots (rather than dark blue) and red-and-yellow bill cannot be seen, it is generally indistinguishable from Black-billed Wood Dove, which has the same rufous flight feathers and short black tail. Red-billed perhaps presents a somewhat darker and browner overall impression. It is also more of a forest-zone species, occurring throughout Africa between 10°N and c15°S, except in most of East Africa. The call of Red-billed Wood Dove is similar to that of Black-billed, hesitantly starting 'BLUE SPOT BLUE SPOT' (one syllable per second), gradually accelerating to a final 2–3 'SPOT's per second, without any three-syllable phrase in the middle.

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References

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